

Experiencing God's Love (1)

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The topic of God's love is truly an overwhelming subject to try and tackle in the space of one message. There is so much that the Bible has to say about the love of God that I doubt anyone has ever come close to fully comprehending it. So, I will simply begin by repeating what Tozer said about the subject matter.

A.W. Tozer once said, "I can no more do justice to this awesome and wonder-filled topic than a child can grasp a star. Still, by reaching toward the star the child may call attention to it and even indicate the direction one must look to see it. And so, I stretch my heart toward the high, shining love of God so that we may be encouraged to look up and have hope."

In John 3:16 "For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.

John 3:16 is only one sentence. And that sentence contains only twenty-four words. Yet that one sentence is packed with so much truth that we literally will not have time to fully unpack its content this morning. But I will try.

From this one verse we can find at least seven truths (there are probably more than seven) about the love of God. Let's look at them now.

1. THE LOVE OF GOD IS UNCONDITIONAL.

For God so loved the world...

The Greek word for world (*kosmos*) is partly defined as "the ungodly multitude; the whole mass of men alienated from God, and therefore hostile to the cause of Christ, world affairs, the aggregate of things earthly, the whole circle of earthly goods, endowments riches, advantages, pleasures, etc, which although hollow and frail and fleeting, stir desire, seduce from God and are obstacles to the cause of Christ.--**Thayer's Greek Lexicon**

This is the world that God loved. It does not say that God loved all those who are good. Or that God loved only the Jews. Or that God loved only the saints. It says, "For God so loved the world."

That God should love the world only increases the mystery of this love.

If you were to ask people to love me, well, that I can understand. But ask me to love the people who tease me and who pick on me? No way! This is a natural reaction by mankind.

If the world were unspoiled, fresh from the hand of the Creator and is not infected by evil, we could more easily comprehend God's desire to save it. But He loved this rebellious world which not only failed to recognize its maker (John 1:10) but openly hated His approach to it (15:18) – and that would seem a rather poor choice for love. The word "love" here in Greek has same root word as *agape*, which means unconditional love.

So, God's love clearly is not based on our spiritual condition or our moral tendencies. It is not based on our behaviour or our attitude toward Him. Rather we see here that God's love for mankind is universal and unconditional. He loves everyone. And this is one of the things that sets Him apart from every other god held up by every other world religion.

Story-- C.S. Lewis

At a comparative religions conference, the wise and the scholarly were in a spirited debate about what is unique about Christianity.

The question that they were debating was what are the things that set Christianity apart from other religions?

One person suggested that what set Christianity apart from other religions was the concept of incarnation, the idea that God took human form as Jesus. However, some else very quickly said, "Well, actually, other faiths believe that God appears in human form."

Another suggestion was offered: what about resurrection? The belief that death is not the final word. That the tomb was found empty. There were those who shook their heads and retorted that other religions have accounts of people returning from the dead.

Then, as the story is told, C.S. Lewis walked into the room. He had on his woollen jacket, a pipe, his arm full of papers, and he was a little early for his presentation. He sat down and took in the conversation, which had by now evolved into a fierce debate. Finally during a lull, he spoke saying, "what's all this commotion about?"

Everyone turned in his direction. Trying to explain themselves they said, "We're debating what's unique about Christianity."

"Oh, that's easy," answered Lewis. "It's grace."

The room fell silent.

Lewis continued that Christianity uniquely claims that God's love comes free of charge with no strings attached. No other religion makes that claim.

After a moment someone commented that Lewis had a point,

---Buddhists, for example, follow an eight-fold path to enlightenment. It is not a free ride.

---Hindus believe in karma, that your actions continually affect the way the world will treat you; that there is nothing that comes to you not set in motion by your actions.

---Another person observed that the Jewish code of the law implies that God has requirements for people in order for these people to be acceptable to Him and

---in Islam God is a God of judgment, not a God of love. You live to appease him

At the end of the discussion everyone concluded Lewis had a point. Only Christianity dares to proclaim that God's love is unconditional, an unconditional love that we call grace.

Christians boldly proclaim that grace really has little to do with us, nothing to do with what we have earned, or what we lack. Rather, grace is all about God and God freely giving to us the gifts of forgiveness, mercy, and love.

So, God's love for us is unconditional. It is as Philip Yancey once wrote: "There is nothing we can do to make God love us more. There is nothing we can do to make God love us less."

2. THE LOVE OF GOD IS SACRIFICIAL.

...that He gave...

An alternate translation of the first part of John 3:16 is as follows: "For this is how God loved the world..." (New Living Translation)

How did God love us? He loved us by giving, by serving, by sacrificing. So here we learn something important about the nature of true love.

Some people love others because of what those people have done for them or because of how others make them feel good or loved. But God shows us that true love has nothing to do with what others can do for me, but everything to do with what I can do for others.

And what are the results of God's sacrificial love? He gave, He did not just lend it to us, He gave so is without expecting to get his Son back.

Illustration:

Bryan Chapell, Chancellor of Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri, tells this story of what had happened in his hometown:

Two brothers were playing on the sandbanks by the river. One ran after the other up a large mound of sand. Unfortunately, the mound was not solid, and their weight caused them to sink in quickly. When the boys did not return home for dinner, the family and neighbours organized a search. They found the younger brother unconscious, with his head and shoulders sticking out above the sand. When they cleared the sand to his waist, he awakened. The searchers asked, "Where is your brother?" The child replied, "I'm standing on his shoulders" With the sacrifice of his own life, the older brother lifted the younger to safety. The tangible and sacrificial love of the older brother literally served as a foundation for the younger brother's life.

Because He gave there must be a receiver.

3. THE LOVE OF GOD IS VALUABLE.

...His only...

Here we see the value of the Father's love for us. Not only was He willing to give, but we see here that He was willing to give the only one He had.

When you give to someone out of your abundance that is one thing, but when you give out of your poverty that is quite another.

If you had several iPads, it might be seen as a noble thing if you were to give one of them to a family who had none. But if you were to give them the only iPad you have, that would be seen

as something more than noble, something above and beyond your duty, it would be seen as a real sacrifice.

How many times have you heard others say this or perhaps you have said it yourself:

“I can’t give you that because it’s the only one I’ve got.”

We have probably all said that, if not out loud, then perhaps mentally. But we can see here that God did not have a backup. God did not have a spare.

But He loved us so much that He was willing to give us His “one and only” (NIV). God gave us all, without any reservations.

4. GOD’S LOVE IS PERSONABLE.

Son,

What God gave is not just any old thing, or iPad or smart phone, that when given, you could buy another. What He gave cannot be replaced, when it is gone, it is gone. God’s love is not merely some abstract concept. It isn’t just a philosophy or a theological concept.

God’s love was made manifest in this world through the person of Jesus Christ, the only Son of the Father. Jesus Christ came into this world to reveal to us the love of God in human form. God loved his Son, like any father would. You could say that when God the Father gave His only son, God’s love was given to us through His son, so if we accept Jesus, we accept God’s love.

Unfortunately, we often neglect His love.

A child was once trying to quote from John 3:16 in the King James Version, which says, “his only begotten Son.” But the child misquoted it and said, “his only forgotten Son.”

It was one of those slips of the tongue that carried more truth than we would care to admit. For by most people in the world today Jesus Christ is truly forgotten. His life is forgotten. His love is forgotten. His sacrifice is forgotten. It is our job as Christians, as God’s ambassadors, to help them remember.

Illustration:

Joe was a drunkard who had been miraculously converted through a street outreach mission. Before his conversion he had gained a reputation as a rundown and dirty nobody for whom there was no hope. But following his conversion to Christ, everything changed. Joe became the most caring person at the mission. He spent his days there, doing whatever needed to be done.

There was never anything he was asked to do that he considered beneath him. Whether it was cleaning up vomit left by some sick alcoholic, or scrubbing toilets after men had left them filthy, Joe did it all with a heart of gratitude.

He could be counted on to feed any man who wandered in the streets, undress and tuck him into bed, when he was too out-of-it to take care of himself.

One evening, after the mission director had delivered his evangelistic message to the usual crowd of hostile men with sunken heads, one of them looked up, came down to the altar and knelt down to pray, crying out for God to help him change.

The repentant drunk person kept shouting, "Oh God, make me like Joe! Make me like Joe! Make me like Joe!" The director leaned over and said, "Son, wouldn't it be better if you prayed 'make me like Jesus'?"

After thinking about it for a few moments, the man looked up with an curious expression and asked, "Is He like Joe?"

What a great story and what a powerful way to live. Are you living your life in such a way that you are reminding people of the only 'forgotten' Son of God?

Is this God like you? How do you live your life at school, at work, at home and in your neighbourhood? You could be the only Jesus they see.

God's love is personable on the one hand because it was made visible through a person – Jesus Christ – but also because it is given on a person – you.

Max Lucado writes:

There are many reasons that God saves you: to bring glory to Himself, to appease His justice, to demonstrate His sovereignty. But one of the sweetest reasons God saved you is because He is fond of you. He likes having you around.

If God had a refrigerator, your picture would be on it. If He had a wallet, your photo would be in it. He sends you flowers every spring and a sunrise every morning. Whenever you want to talk, He will listen. He can live anywhere in the universe, and yet He chose to live in your heart. And the Christmas gift He sent you, is He Himself in Bethlehem. In today's young people's speak, He's crazy about you!

5. GOD'S LOVE IS ACCESSIBLE.

...that whoever believes in Him...

The really good news about God's love is that it is not limited to a select few. It is not available only to those who were born with the right colour of skin or who live in the correct continent. Nor is it difficult to obtain. It is not reserved only for the intellectual elite or the power brokers or financial wizards. No, the love of God is accessible to "whoever believes in" Jesus – the only Son of God.

James Van Tholen in his book "Where All Hope Lies" gets at the accessibility of God's love when he writes:

From the human perspective, when you compare [God] to the other gods of the other religions in the world, you have to say our God is really sort of odd. He uses the most common of people,

people that aren't any different from any of us here; he comes in the most common of ways, when by his Spirit an anonymous young woman is found to be with child.

And the strangest thing is that He comes at all ... He is not the Above-Us-God, too holy to come down. This God's love is so immense that He wants to come down. And He has proven His love by the fact that He did come down and touch our ground.

God has come down to our level. Not in the sense that he has lessened His holiness or lowered His standards. But only in the sense that He has made His love accessible to the average, ordinary person like you and me. He is not a distant God who loves us only from some mystical, faraway place that is completely removed from us. Rather he has entered into our world, and He longs to enter into our lives.

Will you believe in his Son who made the ultimate expression of God's love by giving His life on the cross for your sins? By choosing to believe in Him you access the love of God, the grace of God and the forgiveness of God. By believing in Him you access the new life that only He can provide.